

The Yukon Trail

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An Alaskan Love Story

By William Macleod Raine

CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

So far the mind of the Scotsman followed the probabilities logically, but at this point it made a jump. There were at least two robbers. He was morally sure of that, for this was not a one-man job. Now, if Holt had with him a companion, who of all those in Kuslak was the most likely man? He was a friendless, crabbed old fellow. Since coming to Kuslak old Gideon had been seen constantly with one man. They had been with each other at dinner and had later left the hotel together. The name of the man who had been so friendly with old Holt was Gordon Elliot—and Elliot not only was another enemy of Macdonald, but had very good reasons for getting out of the country just now.

The strong jaw of the mine-owner stood out saliently as he gave short, sharp orders to men in the crowd. One was to get the coroner, a second Wally Selfridge, another the United States district attorney. He divided the rest into squads to guard the roads leading out of town and to see that nobody passed for the present.

The coroner took charge of the body and Wally of the bank. The mine-owner and the district attorney walked up to the hotel together. As soon as they had explained what they wanted, the landlord got a passkey and took them to the room Holt had used.

Apparently the bed had been slept in. In the waste-paper basket the district attorney found something which he held up in a significant silence. Macdonald stepped forward and took from him a small cloth sack.

"One of those we keep our gold in at the bank," said the Scotsman after a close examination. "This definitely ties up Holt with the robbery. Now for Elliot."

"He left the hotel with Holt about five this morning," the porter says. "This was the contribution of the landlord."

The room of Gordon Elliot was in great disorder. Garments had been tossed on the bed and on every chair and had been left to lie wherever they had chanced to fall. Plainly their owner had been in great haste.

Macdonald looked through the closet where clothes hung. "His new fur coat is not here—nor his trail boots. Looks to me as though Mr. Gordon had hit the trail with his friend Holt."

All doubt of this was removed when a prospector reached town with the news that he had met Holt and Elliot traveling toward the divide as fast as they could drive the dogs.

The big Scotsman ordered his team of Siberian wolf-hounds made ready for the trail. As he donned his heavy furs, Colby Macdonald smiled with deep satisfaction. He had Elliot on the run at last.

Just as he closed the door of his room, Macdonald heard the telephone bell ring. He hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders and strode out into the storm. If he had answered the call he would have learned from Diana, who was at the other end of the line, that the stage upon which Sheba had started for Katma had not reached the roadhouse at Smith's Crossing.

Five minutes later the winners of the great Alaska sweepstakes were



The Winners of the Great Alaska Sweepstakes Were Flying Down the Street.

flying down the street in the teeth of the storm. Armed with a rifle and a revolver, their owner was musing into the hills to bring back the men who had robbed his bank and killed the cashier. He traveled alone because he could go faster without a companion. It never occurred to him that he was not a match for any two men he might face.

CHAPTER XX.

In the Blizzard.

"Swiftwater" Pete, the driver of the stage between Kuslak and Katma, did not like the look of the sky as his ponies breasted the long uphill climb that ended at the pass. "Gittin' her

back up for a blizzard, looks like. Doggone it, if that wouldn't jest be my luck," he murmured fretfully.

Sheba hoped there would be one, not, of course, a really, truly blizzard such as Macdonald had told her about, but the tail of a make-believe one, enough to send her glowing with exhilaration into the roadhouse with the happy sense of an adventure achieved. The girl was buoyed up by a sense of freedom. For a time, at least, she was escaping Macdonald's driving energy, the appeal of Gordon Elliot's warm friendliness, and the unvoiced urging of Diane. Good old Peter and the kiddies were the only ones that let her alone.

She looked back at the horses laboring up the hill. Swiftwater had got down and was urging them forward, his long whip crackling about the ears of the leaders. He was worried. He would have liked to turn and run for it. But the last roadhouse was twenty-seven miles back. If the blizzard came howling down the slope they would have a sweet time of it reaching safety. Smith's Crossing was on the other side of the divide, only nine miles away. They would have to worry through somehow.

Miss O'Neill knew that Swiftwater Pete was anxious, and though she was not yet afraid, the girl understood the reason for it. The road ran through the heart of a vast snow-field, the surface of which was being swept by a screaming wind. The air was full of sifted white dust, and the road furrow was rapidly filling. Soon it would be obliterated. Sheba tramped behind the stage-driver and in her tracks walked Mrs. Olson, the other passenger.

Through the muffled scream of the storm Swiftwater shouted back to Sheba. "You wanta keep close to me." She nodded her head. His order needed no explanation. The world was narrowing to a lane whose walls she could almost touch with her fingers. A pall of white wrapped them. Upon them beat a wind of stinging sleet. Nothing could be seen but the blurred outlines of the stage and the driver's figure.

The bitter cold searched through Sheba's furs to her soft flesh and the blast of powdered ice beat upon her face. The snow was getting deeper as the road filled. Once or twice she stumbled and fell. Her strength ebbed, and the hinges of her knees gave unexpectedly beneath her. How long was it, she asked herself, that Macdonald had said men could live in a blizzard?

Staggering blindly forward, Sheba bumped into the driver. He had drawn up to give the horses a moment's rest before sending them plunging at the snow again.

"No chance," he called into the young woman's ear. "Never make Smith's in the world. Goin' try for miner's cabin up gulch little way." The team stuck in the drifts, fought through, and was blocked again ten yards beyond. A dozen times the horses gave up, answered the sting of the whip by diving head first at the white banks, and were stopped by fresh snow-combs.

Pete gave up the fight. He began unhitching the horses, while Sheba and Mrs. Olson, clinging to each other's hands, stumbled forward to join him. The words he shouted across the back of a horse were almost lost in the roar of the shrieking wind.

"... heluvatime ... ride gulch," Sheba made out.

He flung Mrs. Olson astride one of the wheelers and helped Sheba to the back of the right leader. Swiftwater clambered upon its mate himself.

The girl paid no attention to where they were going. The urge of life was so faint within her that she did not greatly care whether she lived or died. Her face was blue from the cold, her vitality was sapped. She seemed to herself to have turned to ice below the hips. Numb though her fingers were, she must keep them fastened tightly in the frozen mane of the animal. She recited her lesson to herself like a child. She must stick on—she must—she must.

Whether she lost consciousness or not Sheba never knew. The next she realized was that Swiftwater Pete was pulling her from the horse. He dragged her into a cabin where Mrs. Olson lay crouched on the floor.

"Got to stable the horses," he explained, and left them.

After a time he came back and lit a fire in the sheet-iron stove. As the circulation that meant life flooded back into her chilled veins Sheba endured a half-hour of excruciating pain. She had to clench her teeth to keep back the groans.

The cabin was empty of furniture except for a home-made table, rough stools, and the frame of a bed. The last occupant had left a little firewood beside the stove, enough to last perhaps for twenty-four hours. Sheba did not need to be told that if the blizzard lasted long enough, they would starve to death. In the handbag left in the stage were a box of candy and an Irish plum pudding. She had brought the latter from the old country with her and was taking it and the chocolates to the Husted children. But

just now the stage was as far from them as Drogheda.

Like many rough frontiersmen, Swiftwater Pete was a diamond in the raw. So far as could be made a hopeless and impossible situation comfortable. His judgment told him that they were caught in a trap from which there was no escape, but for the sake of the women he put a cheerful face on things.

"Lucky we found this cabin," he growled amiably. "By this time we'd 'a' been up Salt creek if we hadn't. Seeing as our luck has stood up so far, I reckon we'll be all right. Mighty kind of Mr. Last Tenant to leave us this firewood. We ain't so worse off."

"If we only had some food," Mrs. Olson suggested.

"Food!" Pete looked at her in assumed surprise. "Huh! What about all that live stock I got in the stable? I've heard tell, ma'am, that broncho tenderloin is a favorite dish with them there French chiefs that do the cooking. They kinder trim it up so it's 'most as good as frangs' legs."

Sheba had never before slept on bare boards with a sealskin coat for a sleeping bag. But she was very tired and dropped off almost instantly. Twice she woke during the night, disturbed by the stiffness and the pain of her body. When she awakened for the third time it was morning.

It seemed to her that the hard, whipsawed planks were pushing through the soft flesh to the bones. She was cold, too, and crept closer to the stout Swedish woman lying beside her. Presently she fell asleep again to the sound of the blizzard howling outside. When she awakened for the third time it was morning.

In the afternoon the blizzard died away. As far as the eye could see, Sheba looked out upon a waste of snow. Her eyes turned from the desolation without to the bare and cheerless room in which they had found shelter. In spite of herself a little shiver ran down the spine of the girl. Had she come into this Arctic solitude to find her tomb?

As soon as the storm had moderated enough to let him go out with safety, Swiftwater Pete had taken one of the horses for an attempt at trail breaking.

"Me, I'm after that plum pudding. I gotta get a feed of oats from the stage for my bronchos too. The scenery here is sure fine, but it ain't what you would call nourishing. Huh! Watch our smoke when me and old Baldface git to bucking them drifts."

He had been gone two hours and the dusk was already descending over the white waste when Sheba ventured out to see what had become of the stage driver. But the cold was so bitter that she soon gave up the attempt to fight her way through the drifts and turned back to the cabin.

Some time later Swiftwater Pete came stumbling into their temporary home. He was fagged to exhaustion but triumphant. Upon the table he dropped from the crook of his numbed arm two packages.

"The makings for a Christmas dinner," he said with a grin.

Mrs. Olson thawed out the pudding and the chocolates in the oven and made a kind of mush out of some oats Pete had saved from the horse feed. They ate their one-sided meal in high spirits. The freeze had saved their lives. If it held clear till tomorrow they could reach Smith's Crossing on the crust of the snow.

Swiftwater broke up the chairs for fuel and demolished the legs of the table, after which he lay down before the stove and fell at once into a sodden sleep.

Presently Mrs. Olson lay down on the bed and began to snore regularly. Sheba could not sleep. The boards tired her bones and she was cold. Sometimes she slipped into cat naps that were full of bad dreams. When she awakened with a start it was to find that the fire had died down. She was shivering from lack of cover. Quietly the girl replenished the fire and lay down again.

When she awakened with a start it was morning. A faint light sifted through the single window of the shack. Sheba whispered to the older woman that she was going out for a little walk.

As she worked her way down the gulch Sheba wondered whether the news of their loss had reached Kuslak. Were search parties out already to rescue them? Colby Macdonald had gone into the blizzard years ago to save her father. Perhaps he might have been out all night trying to save her father's daughter. Peter would go, of course—and Gordon Elliot. The work in the mines would stop and men would volunteer by scores. That was one fine thing about the North. It responded to the unwritten law that a man must risk his own life to save others.

From a little knoll Sheba looked down upon the top of the stage three hundred yards below her, and while she stood there the promise of the new day was blazoned on the sky. It came with amazing beauty of green and primrose and amethyst, while the stars flickered out and the heavens took on the blue of sunrise. She drew a deep, slow breath of adoration and

turned away. As she did so her eyes dilated and her body grew rigid.

Across the snow waste a man was coming. He was moving toward the cabin and must cross the trench close to her. The heart of the girl stopped, then beat wildly to make up the lost stroke. He had come through the blizzard to save her.

At that very instant, as if the stage had been set for it, the wonderful Alaska sun pushed up into the crotch of the peaks and poured its radiance over the Arctic waste. The pink glow swept in a tide of delicate color over the snow and transmuted it to millions of sparkling diamonds. The Great Magician's wand had recreated the world instantaneously.

CHAPTER XXI.

Two on the Trail.

Elliot and Holt left Kuslak in a spume of whirling, blinding snow. They traveled light, not more than



Across the Snow Waste a Man Was Coming.

forty pounds to the dog, for they wanted to make speed. It was not cold for Alaska. They packed their fur coats on the sled and wore mittens of moosehide with duffel lining, on their feet mukluks above "German" socks. Holt had been a sour-dough miner too long to let his partner perspire from overmuch clothing. He knew the danger of pneumonia from a sudden cooling of the heat of the body.

Old Gideon took seven of his dogs, driving them two abreast. Six were huskies, rangy, muscular animals with thick, dense coats. They were in the best of spirits and carried their tails erect like their Malemute leader. Butch, though a Malemute, had a strong strain of collie in him. It gave him a sense of responsibility. His business was to see that the team kept strung out on the trail, and Butch was a past-master in the matter of discipline. His weight was 93 fighting pounds, and he could thrash in short order any dog in the team.

The snow was wet and soft. It clung to everything it touched. The dogs carried pounds of it in the tufts of hair that rose from their backs. An icy pyramid had to be knocked from the sled every half-hour. The snowshoes were heavy with white slush. Densely laden spruce boughs brushed the faces of the men and showered them with unexpected little avalanches.

They took turns in going ahead of the team and breaking trail. It was heavy, muscle-grinding work. Before noon they were both utterly fatigued. They dragged forward through the slush, lifting their laden feet sluggishly. They must keep going, and they did, but it seemed to them that every step must be the last.

Shortly after noon the storm wore itself out. The temperature had been steadily falling and now it took a rapid drop. They were passing through timber, and on a little slope they built with a good deal of difficulty a fire. By careful nursing they soon had a great bonfire going, in front of which they put their wet socks, mukluks, scarfs and parkas to dry. The toes of the dogs had become packed with little ice balls. Gordon and Holt had to go carefully over the feet of each animal to dig these out.

The old timer thawed out a slab of dried salmon till the fat began to frizzle and fed each husky a pound of the fish and a lump of tallow. He and Gordon made a pot of tea and ate some meat sandwiches they had brought with them, to save cooking until night.

When they took the trail again it was in moccasins instead of mukluks. The weather was growing steadily colder, and with each degree of fall in the thermometer the trail was easier. "Mushing at fifty below zero is all right when it is all right," explained

Holt in the words of the old prospector. "But when it isn't all right it's h—l."

"It is not fifty below yet, is it?" "Nope. But she's on the way. When your breath makes a kinder crackling noise she's fifty."

There soon was a crust on the snow that held up the dogs and the sled so that trail breaking was not necessary. The little party pounded steadily over the barren hills. There was no sign of life except what they brought with them into the greater silence beyond.

Each of the men wrapped a long scarf around his mouth and nose for protection, and as the part in front of his face became a sheet of ice shifted the muffler to another place.

Night fell in the middle of the afternoon, but they kept traveling. Not till they were well up toward the summit of the divide did they decide to camp. They drove into a little draw and unharnessed the weary dogs. It was bitterly cold, but they were forced to set up the tent and stove to keep from freezing. Their numbed fingers made a slow job of the camp preparations. At last the stove was going, the dogs fed, and they themselves thawed out. They fell asleep shortly to the sound of the mournful howling of the dogs outside.

Long before daybreak they were afoot again. Holt went out to chop some wood for the stove while Gordon made breakfast preparations. The little miner brought in an armful of wood and went out to get a second supply. A few moments later Elliot heard a cry.

He stepped out of the tent and ran to the spot where Holt was lying under a mass of ice and snow. The young man threw aside the broken blocks that had plunged down from a ledge above.

"Badly hurt, Gid?" he asked. "I done bust my laig, son," the old man answered with a twisted grin. "You mean that it is broken?"

"Tell you that in a minute." He felt his leg carefully and with Elliot's help tried to get up. Groaning, he slid back to the snow.

"Yep. She's busted," he announced. Gordon carried him to the tent and laid him down carefully. The old miner swore softly.

"Ain't this a devil of a note, boy? You'll have to get me to Smith's Crossing and leave me there."

It was the only thing to be done. Elliot broke camp and packed the sled. Upon the load he put his companion, well wrapped up in furs.

Two miles up the road Gordon stopped his team sharply. He had turned a bend in the trail and had come upon an empty stage buried in the snow.

The fear that had been uppermost in Elliot's mind for twenty-four hours clutched at his throat. Was it tragedy upon which he had come after his long journey?

Holt guessed the truth. "They got stalled and cut loose the horses. Must have tried to ride the cayuses to shelter."

"To Smith's Crossing?" asked Gordon.

"Expect so." Then, with a whoop, the man on the sled contradicted himself. "No, by Moses, to Dick Fiddler's old cabin up the draw. That's where Swiftwater would aim for till the blizzard was over."

"Where is it?" demanded his friend. "Swing over to the right and follow the little gulch. I'll wait till you come back."

Gordon dropped the gee-pole and started on the instant. Eagerness, anxiety, dread, fought in his heart. He knew that any moment now he might stumble upon the evidence of the sad story which is repeated in Alaska many times every winter. It rang in him like a bell that where tough, hardy miners succumbed a frail girl would have small chance.

He cut across over the hill toward the draw, and at what he saw his pulse quickened. Smoke was pouring out of the chimney of a cabin and falling groundward, as it does in the Arctic during very cold weather. Had Sheba found safety there?

As he pushed forward the rising sun flooded the earth with pink and struck a million sparkles of color from the snow. The wonder of it drew the eyes of the young man for a moment toward the hills.

A tumult of joy flooded his veins. The girl who held in her soft hands the happiness of his life stood looking at him. It seemed to him that she was the core of all that lovely tide of radiance. He moved toward her and looked down into the trench where she waited. Swiftly he kicked off his snowshoes and leaped down beside her. The gleam of tears was in her eyes as she held out both hands to him. During the long look they gave each other something wonderful to both of them was born into the world.

When he tried to speak his hoarse voice broke. "Sheba—little Sheba! Safe, after all. Thank God, you—you—" He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried again. "If you knew—God, how I have suffered! I was afraid—I dared not let myself think."

A live pulse beat in her white throat. The tears brimmed over. Then, somehow, she was in his arms weeping. Her

eyes slowly turned to his, and he met the touch of her surrendered lips.

Nature had brought them together by one of her restless and unmediated impulses.

A stress of emotion had swept her into his arms. Now she drew away from him shyly. The conventions in which she had been brought up asserted themselves. An absurd little fear intruded itself into her happiness. Had she rushed into his arms like a lovesick girl, taking it for granted that he cared for her?

"You—came to look for us?" she asked, with the little shy stiffness of embarrassment.

"For you—yes."

He could not take his eyes from her. It seemed to him that a bird was singing in his heart the gladness he could not express. He had for many hours pushed from his mind pictures of her lying white and rigid on the snow. Instead she stood beside him, her delicate beauty vivid as the flush of a flame.

"Did they telephone that we were lost?"

"Yes. I was troubled when the storm grew. I could not sleep. So I called up the roadhouse by long distance. They had not heard from the stage. Later I called again. When I could stand it no longer, I started."

"Not on foot?"

"No, with Holt's dog team. He is back there. His leg is broken. A snow-slide crushed him this morning where we camped."

"Bring him to the cabin. I will tell the others you are coming."

"Have you had any food?" he asked. A tired smile lit up the shadows of weariness under her soft, dark eyes. "Bolted oats, plum pudding and chocolates," she told him.

"We have plenty of food on the sled. I'll bring it at once."

She nodded, and turned to go to the cabin. He watched for a moment the lit in her walk. An expression from his reading jumped to his mind. Melodious feet! Some poet had said that, hadn't he? Surely it must have been Sheba of whom he was thinking, this girl so virginal of body and of mind, free and light-footed as a caribou on the hills.

Gordon returned to the sled and drove the team up the draw to the cabin. The three who had been marooned came to meet their rescuer.

"You must 'a' come right through the storm lickity split," Swiftwater said.

"You're right we did. This side parner of mine was bent on wrestling with a blizzard," Holt answered dryly.

"Sorry you broke your laig, Gid."

"Then there's two of us sorry, Swiftwater. It's one of the best laigs I've got."

Sheba turned to the old miner impulsively. "If you could be knowing what I am thinking of you, Mr. Holt—how full our hearts are of the gratitude—" She stopped, tears in her voice.

"She! No need of that, miss. He dragged me along." His thumb jerked toward the man who was driving. "I've seen better dog punchers than Elliot, but he's got the world beat at routin' old-timers out of bed and persuadin' them to kick in with him and buck a blizzard. Me, o' course, I'm an old fool for comin'—"

The dark eyes of the girl were like stars in a frosty night. "Then you're



He Met the Touch of Her Surrendered Lips.

the kind of a fool I love, Mr. Holt. I think it was just fine of you, and I'll never forget it as long as I live."

Mrs. Olson had cooked too long in lumber and mining camps not to know something about bone setting. Under her direction Gordon made splints and helped her bandage the broken leg. Sheba cooked an appetizing breakfast. The aroma of coffee and the smell of frying bacon stimulated appetites that needed no tempting.

Holt, propped up by blankets, ate with the others. For a good many years he had taken his luck as it came with philosophic endurance. Now he wasted no time in mourning what could not be helped. He was lucky the ice slide had not hit him in the head. A broken leg would mend.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Change Bad Ways.

Instead of trying to mend their ways some people would save a lot of time by getting new ones.